

1-1-1984

Artisan Culture and the Organization of Chicago's German Workers in the Gilded Age, 1860 to 1890

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ABSTRACT

This essay evaluates the nature of German artisan culture in gilded-age Chicago and its role in the organization of modern working-class institutions. Three examples—the Workingmen's Associations of Chicago's German workers in the 1850s and 1860s, the Bakers' Mutual Benefit Society, and the tradition of tool ownership among the city's German cabinetmakers—illustrate particular resources that artisan culture provided to German craftsmen, whether it be fellowship, intellectual stimulation, organizational strength, or a sense of personal independence. At the same time, artisan culture became anachronistic amidst the rapidly expanding industries of Chicago, as systematic mechanization destroyed the central role that artisans had played in the production process. When speed and depth of economic change made German craftsmen a receptive constituency for the period's radical political movements, artisan culture played an indispensable role for German workers in their efforts to found Chicago's modern labor institutions.

Since the 1960s Anglo-American social and labor historians have expended considerable effort in studying artisans and their culture, particularly in the period from the late eighteenth through the mid nineteenth centuries.¹ Artisans are seen as critically important in the formation of the nineteenth-century working class as they built its institutions and shaped its culture using their strong preindustrial traditions. As much attention has not been expended on artisans in the second half of the nineteenth century, in part because of the assumption that artisan culture had by then been significantly weakened by the impact of industrialization. Yet artisans played a critical role in the formation of the American working class at least through the 1880s, and their contribution was particularly strong in America's new, booming industrial cities which commonly imported most of their workers from Europe. These men brought with them traditions which formed a resource for building modern working-class institutions when native American ones were either weak or unappealing to the great numbers of foreign-born workers. Chicago's German artisans in the gilded age offer the opportunity to study the nature and transformation of these imported traditions at a critical point in the American industrial revolution when production was being systematically mechanized in a broad range of industries.

The economic changes of this period are well formulated in a recently published theory of American economic development by David M. Gordon, Richard Edwards, and Michael

¹ The best review of the scholarly literature pertaining to artisans is still Bryan D. Palmer, "Most Uncommon Common Men: Craft and Culture in Historical Perspective," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 1 (1976), 5–31. His footnotes constitute an excellent bibliography. For more recent works on the subject with good references see I. J. Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth-Century London: John Gast and his Time* (Baton Rouge, 1979), and Paul G. Faler, *Mechanics and Manufacturers in the Early Industrial Revolution: Lynn, Massachusetts, 1780–1860* (Albany, 1981). For an excellent German study in the field see Wolfgang Renzsch, *Handwerker und Lohnarbeiter in der frühen Arbeiterbewegung: Zur sozialen Basis von Gewerkschaften und Sozialdemokratie im Reichsgründungsjahrzehnt*, *Kritische Studien zur Geschichtswissenschaft*, 43 (Göttingen, 1980).

Reich.² They see the first stage of the American industrial revolution beginning approximately in 1820 and running into the later nineteenth century. In this phase manufacturers consolidated traditional methods of production and the workers who performed them into larger units and marketed the increased output. Machines were introduced, but the whole process of production was not typically organized around them. While artisans lost considerable independence, they retained some skills as well as significant influence over production. The basic methods of labor were not, therefore, fundamentally transformed, although the context in which labor was performed had been reorganized. The 1870s to the 1890s marked a transitional period when this older industrial order began to be undermined:

Relying primarily on new methods of mechanization, industrial capitalists began in the early 1880s to explore and increasingly to implement new production techniques that typically eliminated skilled workers, reduced required skills to the barest minimum, provided more and more regulation over the pace of production, and generated a spreading homogeneity in the work tasks and working conditions of industrial employees.³

A new industrial era began in the 1890s and flowered after the turn of the century based on the fundamental transformation of labor through the mechanization and systematic rationalization of production. Unusually skilled, German workers were in a critical position to experience these changes in the transitional decades between 1860 and 1890 as one era ended and another began. This transitional character of the period decisively shaped the role of artisan culture as Chicago's German workers used it to organize in America's proto-typical industrial boom town.

Chicago expanded from a regional commercial and manufacturing center in 1860 to the second most important industrial city in the country by 1890.⁴ Its population grew accordingly, leaping in the same period from 100,000 to over 1,000,000.⁵ Most of the immigrants who fueled this growth and worked in the city's booming factories came from northern Europe. In 1880, for example, 65.4 percent of those employed in the manufacturing branch of the economy were foreign-born, of whom 82 percent were from Germany, Ireland, Great Britain, and Scandinavia.⁶ This was, then, the era of the "old immigration," before the massive arrivals from southern and central Europe after the turn of the century. Germans made up a disproportionate share of Chicago's industrial work force—26.3 percent in 1880 when Germans constituted 15.2 percent of the city's population.⁷ The representation of German artisans in the city's skilled trades was often even more pronounced. Table 1 summarizes the most important skilled occupations for German men in 1890 at the end of the period:

² David M. Gordon, Richard Edwards, and Michael Reich, *Segmented Work, Divided Workers: The Historical Transformation of Labor in the United States* (Cambridge, 1982).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁴ This judged by the gross value of industrial product. The first city in the country was New York, the third, Philadelphia; U.S. 11th Census (1890), *Report on Manufacturing Industries, Part II: Statistics of Cities* (Washington, D.C., 1895), p. xxxii.

⁵ John B. Jentz and Hartmut Keil, "From Immigrants to Urban Workers: Chicago's German Poor in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, 1883–1908," *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, 68 (1981), 61.

⁶ Bessie Louise Pierce, *A History of Chicago*, III (New York, 1957), 517.

⁷ *Ibid.*; Jentz and Keil, p. 61.

Table 1

The top ten skilled occupations for German males in Chicago in 1890

occupation	no. German-born	% of trade
carpenters and joiners	4,739	23.6
tailors	2,439	27.7
painters, glaziers, and varnishers	1,936	20.1
masons, brick and stone	1,655	32.3
butchers	1,609	33.9
machinists	1,484	18.9
bakers	1,263	47.8
cabinetmakers	1,178	39.8
boot and shoemakers	1,164	32.6
blacksmiths and wheelwrights	1,057	22.8

Source: U.S. 11th Census, *Statistics of Population: Occupations*, pp. 650-51.

The sheer existence of large numbers of Germans with strong craft traditions was not, however, a guarantee of successful labor institutions.⁸ The structure and development of any particular industry as well as the character of its work force were as or more important. The history of particular industries is, however, beyond the scope of this essay. Its purpose is to analyze the nature and transformation of artisan culture as German workers used it to successfully organize in gilded-age Chicago. This analysis will contribute to the understanding of other questions, such as why German workers provided such a large constituency for radical politics. Artisan culture is defined broadly here to include both the social practices and political ideas brought to America by German artisans as well as the traditions and values of particular crafts. Three extensive examples have been selected here to illustrate German artisan culture and the institutions that represented it—the workers' associations that derived from the German Revolution of 1848-49, the Mutual Benefit Society of Chicago's German bakers, and the tradition of tool ownership among Chicago's skilled furniture workers. Each will be analyzed in an effort to illuminate not only the group in question but also a larger field within the culture of German artisans.

Workers' Associations

The *Arbeitervereine* (Workers' Associations) founded in Chicago were examples of a type of organization common in Germany, particularly since the 1840s. The Prussian government, for example, tolerated some workers' organizations as replacements for moribund guild institutions, as long as they did not become politically dangerous and kept to

⁸ Chicago's German tailors and shoemakers, for example, had large numbers and strong craft traditions to build upon but failed to found unions of comparable strength to those of the furniture workers, building carpenters, masons, metal workers, bakers, cigarmakers, or brewery workers. The explanation lies primarily in the structure and development of the industries in which they worked. Between 1860 and 1890, when the German workers in these other trades were organizing, the Chicago clothing and shoe-making industries were decentralizing into sweat shops and putting out more and more work to individuals and families working at home. The dispersion of these industries and consequent isolation of their workers made them especially hard to organize. At the same time these industries, particularly clothing, were used by new immigrant groups to gain a first foothold in the local economy, making the ethnic turnover of the work force unusually strong. Both industries also faced particularly fierce national competition from other industrial centers. See Pierce, III, 171-175.

moral and intellectual improvement. One of the most important of these, according to P.H. Noyes, was the Berlin Artisans' Union whose aim was "to further the popular development of the spiritual, moral, social, industrial and civic life of the workers through teaching and action." The club held lectures and discussion periods for its members, which included in 1846 some 94 master craftsmen and 1,984 journeymen." Appealing mainly to artisans, such associations spread throughout Germany in the revolutionary 1840s, serving, despite their declared purposes, "to develop a spirit of unity among the working-class members, a sense of common cause which was to carry over into the revolution."⁹

The tradition of workers' associations continued in Germany after the failure of the revolution of 1848–49. In the 1860s the Englishman James Samuelson visited "The General Improvement Association" of Elberfeld in Germany and reported:

Although extremely plain, this hall is very cheerful and attractive. At one end stands the rostrum, or lecturer's desk, from which lectures and addresses are delivered by the professors at the higher schools, the principals of factories, and by the workingmen themselves. The lectures are on subjects of literary, social, and economical interest, as well as on political questions affecting the welfare of the whole nation, but strictly party politics are wisely excluded. Lectures are also delivered on science applied to the arts. Discussions follow the lectures. During the lecture beer, coffee, and tobacco are allowed, and in order to enable the members to partake of these with comfort, the hall is supplied, not with rows of uncomfortable [sic] benches, as with us, but with a great number of small oblong tables ... Ladies are often present at the lectures, ... and in one [room] there is accommodation for an excellent library.¹⁰

The institution in Elberfeld promoted a culture of educational enlightenment, entertainment, and general uplift that was common among artisans in Europe and America in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The German variety was probably distinctive for its stress on sociability, mixture of the sexes, and use of beer and tobacco, while the Anglo-American form—so often promoted in the mechanics' institutes—had a more churchly atmosphere. Hence Samuelson's surprise at finding tables instead of pewlike benches in Elbersfeld. Despite national differences, this international artisan culture supported a tradition of popular republicanism that made craftsmen a common force in the democratic politics of several countries.¹¹ Given Chicago's strongly immigrant working class and the importance of Germans within it, it is not surprising that this tradition of the mechanics' institutes and workers' clubs owed a great debt to German artisans. They gave it an early start in the city.

Germans in Chicago formed the Workers' Association and its related benefit society in an effort to meet their needs during the financial crisis of 1857–58.¹² The people mentioned in accounts of the Association in the *Illinois Staats-Zeitung* give an indication of its mixed membership. Of twenty men reported in official capacities in the Association in 1861, ten could be found in the city directories—a chairmaker, tailor, shoemaker, black-

⁹ P.H. Noyes, *Organization and Revolution: Working-Class Associations in the German Revolutions of 1848–1849* (Princeton, 1966), pp. 48–9.

¹⁰ As cited in the *Working Man's Advocate*, 25 Dec. 1869.

¹¹ Palmer, p. 11.

¹² Gaps in German-language sources created by the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 make the early history of the Association difficult to follow; surviving issues of the *Illinois Staats-Zeitung* in the early 1860s do make it possible to trace the Association in those years. The following sources refer to the founding of the Workers' Association: *Jahres-Bericht der Beamten der Deutschen Gesellschaft in Chicago, für das Jahr, – April 1857–1858* (Chicago, 1858), p. 12; Hermann Schlüter, *Die Internationale in Amerika. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Arbeiter-Bewegung in den Vereinigten Staaten* (Chicago, 1918), p. 307; Bessie Louise Pierce, *A History of Chicago*, II (New York, 1940), 166–67.

smith, clerk, school teacher, city inspector and gauger, grocer, flour and seed store owner, and soap manufacturer. In the early 1860s the most active secretary of the Association was the blacksmith, the most active president, the school teacher. Thus the Association united artisans, proprietors, and lower level professionals; the acceptance of members of higher status—like lawyers and editors—prompted discussions in the Association's debating society.¹³ Notably, two of the ten men found in the Directories, including the active blacksmith, lived in boardinghouses, which functioned as temporary quarters, often for newcomers. The Workers' Association was certainly among the institutions that newcomers found congenial for fellowship and status in a foreign land. It obviously met important needs, for by the early 1860s every geographic section of the city—that is, the North, West, and South Sides—had its own German Workers' Association built on the model of the central organization. The one on the West Side was by far the most active of these, building its own hall even before the central organization. A description of its new hall opened on the West Side in 1864 gives an idea of the Association's functions and purposes:

Das Gebäude ist 40 bei 70 Fuss lang und zwei Stock hoch. Im unteren Stock sind zwei Stores errichtet worden, die verrentet werden sollen, ... Hinter den Stores befindet sich ein geräumiges Lokal, welches dem Verein zur Abhaltung von Versammlungen dienen soll. Die eigentliche Halle im zweiten Stock ist 40 bei 44 Fuss lang, sehr hoch und durch die schönen hohen Bogenfenster äusserst hell und luftig.

Der Verein erfreut sich einer Mitgliederzahl von ungefähr 130, die ausschliesslich Arbeiter und mit warmen Herzen dem Zwecke ergeben sind, den derselbe sich vorgesteckt hat, nämlich sociale und politische Ausbildung der Mitglieder und ein strenges Wachen über ihre Rechte, um sich selbst und ihren Nachkommen Leben, Freiheit und Streben nach Glückseligkeit zu sichern ...

Des Sonntags Abends soll die Halle zur Abhaltung von Concerten benutzt werden, die am nächsten Sonntag beginnen sollen und am Montag Abend soll sie durch einen splendiden Ball eingeweiht werden.¹⁴

The activities of the central Workers' Association reflected its basic purposes of fellowship, education, and general uplift. In 1861 it had 250 members, \$500 in the bank, a good library, a piano for the new singing club, and a debating society. It also offered free English and drawing classes and sponsored picnics.¹⁵ By the summer of 1863 the Association had over 1000 members and a library with 740 volumes, which grew to 3,000 books within two years.¹⁶ The source of the Association's prosperity was its promotion of entertainment open to the public, usually on Sunday evenings in its meeting hall on the corner of Randolph and Wells street in the center of the city.¹⁷ On October 19, 1861, the program of the evening's entertainment included¹⁸: a lecture by Dr. Ernst Schmidt, a liberal '48er, on the "Prejudices and Errors in the Popular Home Remedies"; an overture; a declamation about the American national union; a concert piece; a song by the singing society; a violin solo; a declamation, "The Song of the Bell"; a humorous talk; a song by the singing society; a concert piece.

Politics was absent from the program on October 19, 1861, but not from the history of the Association. It was intimately involved in the left Republican politics of the Civil War era, sending, for example, delegates to a convention of Radical Republicans and opponents

¹³ *Illinois Staats-Zeitung* (hereafter *ISZ*), 4. 9. 61.

¹⁴ *ISZ*, 13. 10. 64.

¹⁵ *ISZ*, 28. 3. and 12. 6. 1861.

¹⁶ *ISZ*, 31. 8. and 10. 6. 1863; Pierce, II, 167.

¹⁷ *ISZ*, 5. 12. 1861

¹⁸ *ISZ*, 19. 10. 1861

of Lincoln held in Cleveland in 1864, a decision which split the organization.¹⁹ The Association also actively supported the sending of German military companies to the War and provided aid to the dependents of the soldiers.²⁰ Afterwards, during the debates prompted by the eight-hour movement in 1867, the Association proposed the establishment of workers' cooperatives as the true answer to the labor question since they would abolish "hired" labor; it expected little from the eight-hour day itself.²¹ In 1869 the central Workers' Association undertook a successful effort to build its own hall, which, however, tragically burned down soon afterwards along with its entire library.²²

The Association regrouped and continued its work after the Great Fire of 1871, but by then it no longer played such a significant role in the organized life of Chicago's skilled German workers. Founded in the late 1860s and early 1870s, institutions like unions and labor papers became the organizational centers of Chicago's German labor movement. Nevertheless, before these institutions were established the Workers' Associations stood out as centers of organized social and political life for Chicago's German workers. They taught the organizational skills, self-discipline, and ideals needed to found labor organizations and participate in politics. In addition, the political culture of popular republicanism that they fostered made the ideals of the American political system congenial to German workers, even when these ideals were severely contradicted by the realities of life in gilded-age Chicago.

The Bakers' Mutual Benefit Society

Mutual benefit societies flowered among craftsmen in nineteenth-century America as they organized together to provide an elementary level of insurance against sickness and death. Commonly organized by trades, the benefit societies also often had secret fraternal features that makes them extremely difficult to trace. In addition, considerable numbers of craftsmen simply joined one of the popular secret fraternal orders, which also provided insurance. United by a common purpose, appealing to craftsmen who could afford to pay the dues, and providing tangible returns, the mutual benefit societies frequently predated labor unions and proved more stable. The benefit societies were part of the craft heritage that helped make the gilded-age labor movement possible. They also existed in competition with unions when the unions tried to provide their own benefit features, while at the same time they served as models for those very efforts of the unions. The history of Chicago's bakers gives one good example of how a union literally grew out of a German mutual benefit society in the mid-1880s. Constituting by far the largest national group among the city's bakers, Germans took the lead in organizing the industry.²³

From the perspective of the successful unionists of the progressive era the benefit societies belonged to a kind of pre-history. John Schudel, a Chicagoan and the historian of the national union, wrote that in the late 1870s and early 1880s "an agitation was going on among the bakers throughout the country with the object of forming open organizations among themselves. To this must be ascribed the existence of those bakers' associations, loose trade union organizations and sick and death benefit associations we meet with at

¹⁹ *ISZ*, 9.10.1863; 16.3., 11.6., and 28.7. and 1.8.1864

²⁰ *ISZ*, 19.6.61; 6.11.61; 13.8.62.

²¹ *Chicago Tribune* (hereafter *CT*), 11.4.67.

²² *ISZ*, 16.4.1869; *Der Westen* (Sunday edition of the *ISZ*), 28.3.1869; *Der Deutsche Arbeiter* (hereafter *DA*), 28.5.1870.

²³ See Table 1.

the inception of the National Union of bakery workmen, and wherefrom it took its rise. These associations sprung into life within the years 1880–1885.”²⁴ Although he found these organizations “temporary” and “devoid of clear aim and definite principles,” sometimes being mere “pleasure clubs,” they were nonetheless the origin of the national union. A closer look at the Chicago bakers reveals the nature and critical role of these early institutions well before the 1880s.

Like so many other trades, Chicago's bakers first began to organize in earnest during the Civil War, profiting from the demand for labor produced in part by large contracts for bread from the military.²⁵ Journeymen bakers organized in March, 1864, but their union disappeared after losing a strike that summer.²⁶ One of the reasons the journeymen bakers could not sustain themselves was the surviving strength of a craft in which it was still common practice for bakery workers to lodge with their bosses.²⁷ Yet a permanent organization did emerge in this period when the *Bäcker Unterstützungsverein* (Bakers' Mutual Benefit Society) was founded in 1867, the year that saw the culmination of the city's first eight-hour movement. Uniting masters and journeymen, the Benefit Society concentrated on providing both insurance and entertainment. These functions sustained it at least until 1917 when it celebrated its fiftieth anniversary.²⁸ In 1899 it had 600 members and an insurance fund of \$10,000.²⁹ For whole periods the annual balls and picnics of the Mutual Benefit Society were the only signs of organized life among Chicago's bakers.

The Benefit Society closely reflected the craft world of Chicago's German bakers. In the late 1860s the treasurer of the Society, Frank Heuschkel, was also the proprietor of a boarding house catering especially to German bakers.³⁰ He advertised not only his rooms and food but also his ability to find jobs for the unemployed and workers for masters. Heuschkel remained active both in the Society and as a boarding house keeper into the 1880s. Through boarding houses like his the city had an institutionalized labor market for German bakery workers at an early date, and this market was controlled by the numerous small masters so prominent in the industry. One of the first objectives of union organizers in the 1880s was to break this control by founding their own hiring bureau.³¹ Such conflicts were made especially bitter because of the intimacy between masters and journeymen. The practice of journeymen boarding with their masters has already been mentioned. The masters also still presumed to speak for the common interests of the trade, as indicated in the unusual career of Mathias Schmiedinger.

Schmiedinger was repeatedly president of the Benefit Society in the 1880s. He had been in Chicago at least since the early 1870s when he was part of a circle of men congregating around the *Vorbote*, a Chicago socialist paper founded in 1874 with the aid of the organized German trades, particularly the furniture workers and printers.³² He was familiar therefore

²⁴ *The Bakers' Journal & Deutsch-Amerikanische Bäcker-Zeitung* (hereafter *BJ & DABZ*), 6.4.1901.

²⁵ *ISZ*, 10.12.1862.

²⁶ *ISZ*, 7.3. and 4.4.1864; 7., 9., 14., 15.6.1864; 4. and 16.7.1864.

²⁷ In a sample of German bakers taken by the Chicago Project, University of Munich, from the federal manuscript census, over half the bakers lived with their bosses who were also German.

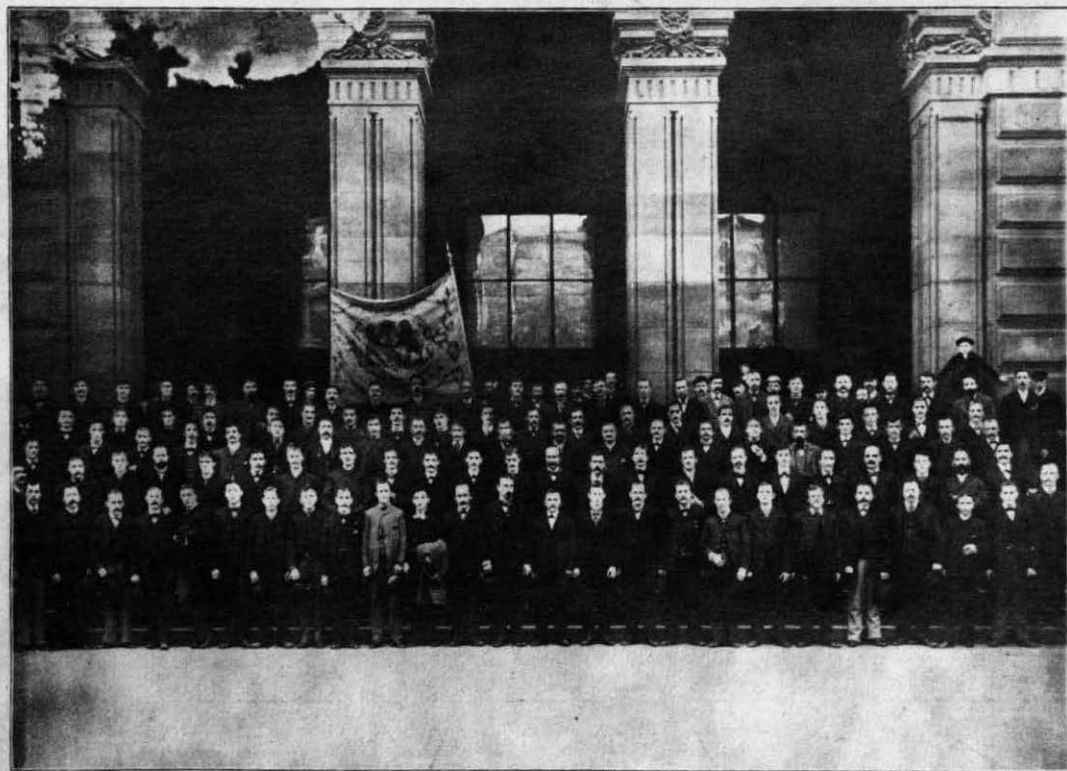
²⁸ *ISZ*, 17.1. and 24.8.1867; on the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary the Mutual Benefit Society produced its own pamphlet, “Fünfzig-Jähriges Jubiläum des Chicago Bäcker Unterstützungs Vereins, Samstag den 3. Februar 1917, Nordseite Turn Halle, Chicago.”

²⁹ *Fackel* (Sunday edition of the *ChAZ*), 5.11.1899.

³⁰ *DA*, 28.8.1869; 9.7.1870.

³¹ See, for example, *ChAZ*, 19.6.1881.

³² *Vorbote* (Chicago), 4.5.1887; Renate Kiewewetter, “Die Institution der deutsch-amerikanischen Arbeiterpresse in Chicago: Zur Geschichte des *Vorboten* und der *Chicagoer Arbeiter-Zeitung*, 1874–1886,” M.A. Thesis Univ. of Munich 1982, pp.75–6.



Mitglieder des Chicago Bäcker-Unterstützungs-Vereins, vom 9. September 1883.

Gruppenaufnahme des Chicago Bäcker-Unterstützungsvereins vor dem Cook County Verwaltungsgebäude aus dem Jahr 1883.
(Chicago Historical Society, IChi-17522.)

with the other elements of the Chicago German left and played a controversial part in it. Yet, despite his radical politics, he was a master baker in the 1880s. The fact that he played so central a role in the history of Chicago's bakers' unions is an indication of the strength of the craft tradition in the industry, for Schmiedinger certainly saw no difference between his interests and radical ideals and those of the journeymen. The same holds for those who followed him. The fact that he was ultimately pushed aside by Chicago's German bakery workers is part of the history of the emergence of modern unions from out of a craft.

After the depression of the 1870s the first serious efforts to found a bakers' union in Chicago took place in late 1879 and 1880. At an organizational meeting in January, 1880, Mathias Schmiedinger gave the opening speech in German, noting the past achievements of the Benefit Society with providing insurance but emphasizing that now was the time to found a union to shorten the work day and raise wages.³³ Schmiedinger was elected chairman of the new body.³⁴ After apparently successful meetings between German, English-speaking, and Bohemian bakers the union disappeared.³⁵ A more successful organizational effort took place the next year led by the socialists associated with the *Chicagoer Arbeiter-Zeitung*; the Benefit Society played a minor role in it, if at all.³⁶ After losing a major strike in the summer, this bakers' union also disappeared. The next year, 1882, the Knights of Labor were the main instigators of organization among Chicago bakers, forming German Bakers Assembly 1801.³⁷ Although Schmiedinger appeared prominently in at least one meeting of Assembly 1801³⁸, it is unclear to what extent the Benefit Society was involved. Assembly 1801 led a shadowy existence for a few years, as did a German bakers' union probably formed in 1882.³⁹ By the middle of the decade, however, little, if anything, remained but the Benefit Society.⁴⁰

The bakers' union movement revived in Chicago and the nation when a national bakers' paper, the *Deutsch-Amerikanische Bäcker-Zeitung*, was founded in 1885 under the impetus of the New York journeymen bakers. An international union was organized at a convention in Pittsburgh in January, 1886. Chicago's bakers were represented by the Benefit Society, which was accepted into the international as Local 10.⁴¹ In the spring of 1886 Local 10 had 814 members constituting 85 percent of the organized bakers in Chicago.⁴² The wholesale acceptance of the Benefit Society as a union immediately caused deep divisions in the local and problems with the international, in part because masters—including Mathias Schmiedinger—were members and officers. These conflicts were compounded by Schmiedinger's dominating personality and the heated atmosphere of Chicago labor politics during the eight-hour movement and Haymarket Affair.

³³ *ChAZ*, 3. 1. 1880.

³⁴ *Fackel*, 4. 1. 1880.

³⁵ *ChAZ*, 18. 1. 1880; *ISZ*, 18. 1. 1880.

³⁶ See the *ChAZ* from April through August, 1881.

³⁷ *ChAZ*, 2. and 28. 8. 1882.

³⁸ *ChAZ*, 28. 8. 1882.

³⁹ *ChAZ*, 2. 2. 1882. In 1886 there were 976 organized bakers in the whole state of Illinois, the overwhelming majority in Chicago; only 16 of these were in the Knights of Labor, while the rest were in labor unions; *Fourth Biennial Report of the Bureau of Labor Statistics of Illinois. 1886* (Springfield, IL, 1886), p. 234.

⁴⁰ There was a note in the *ChAZ* 30. 12. 84 about a Bohemian Bakers Association.

⁴¹ *ChAZ*, 11. 1. 1887; *BJ & DABZ*, 14. 1. 1911.

⁴² *Fourth Biennial Report of the Bureau of Labor Statistics of Illinois. 1886*, p. 224.

The complicated factional fights among Chicago's baker unionists over the next several years are only worth following in outline, but the stakes were nonetheless high, both for individual members and the character of the Chicago bakers' unions. The core of the matter was the relationship of the union to the Benefit Society. In 1886 and 1887 all members of the Benefit Society had to be members of the union, which meant conversely that if someone left the union he left the Society and lost the benefits due him and the contributions he had made.⁴³ The relationship between the union and the Society was even closer: typically the Society would meet, settle its business, and then declare itself a union and take up labor matters.⁴⁴ Members complained that there was often not enough time left for the union meeting.⁴⁵ The two meetings were finally separated in late 1886.⁴⁶

Politics entered this festering situation early when the anarchistically inclined *Chicagoer Arbeiter-Zeitung* was closed down by the police after the Haymarket bomb exploded. Under the leadership of men like Schmiedinger, Local 10 imposed a \$ 1 tax on all members to help the paper get started again.⁴⁷ Appealing to the international union for support, a minority opposed this tax and the politics it implied. Schmiedinger was also attacked for being a master baker, a problem which the union had tried to solve by making him an honorary member.⁴⁸ The international sided with the minority, which left to form its own local. By early 1887 tensions between Local 10 and the international were so heated that Local 10 withdrew from the larger body.⁴⁹ Led by Schmiedinger and others, about 300 members formed two independent Chicago locals, which strongly supported the left wing of the Chicago labor movement.⁵⁰ And still, amidst all this factional fighting, members of the Benefit Society were still supposed to be union members, but of which local? At the same time Schmiedinger used the Benefit Society to support the independent unions, despite the fact that many of its members belonged to the other locals. At a climatic meeting of the Benefit Society in March 1887 the members rejected Schmiedinger's leadership and voted to separate the Society and its funds from the unions.⁵¹

The story of these bitter disputes illustrates the ambiguous heritage that craft traditions provided for modern unions. Neither the character of its membership, the nature of its leaders, nor its intended purposes allowed the Benefit Society to function as a union, and yet it was the only stable organization among Chicago's bakers before 1886. It is thus not surprising that it was the basis for the unions which did emerge. Within it were the men who had learned how to form and run an organization, and it had taught its numerous members the value of uniting for common goals. In addition, although it was not an educational institution like the Workers' Associations, its regular meetings, picnics, and balls provided occasions for Chicago's German bakers to meet, discuss, and learn from each others' experience. Without the network of communication and trust built up on such occasions it would probably have been impossible to organize Chicago's German bakery workers. On the other hand, the Benefit Society institutionalized outmoded relationships between masters and journeymen, who had become instead employers and workers. The

⁴³ *Deutsch-Amerikanische Bäcker-Zeitung* (hereafter *DABZ*; the title changed to the *BJ & DABZ* in 1895), 7.7.86.

⁴⁴ *DABZ*, 27.10.86; 22.12.86.

⁴⁵ *DABZ*, 27.10.86.

⁴⁶ *DABZ*, 23.11.86.

⁴⁷ *DABZ*, 9.2.87; *BJ & DABZ* 14.1.1911.

⁴⁸ *DABZ*, 7.7.86.

⁴⁹ *ChAZ*, 3. and 4.2.1887.

⁵⁰ *ChAZ*, 18.2.1887.

⁵¹ *DABZ*, 23.3.1887.

unions could not allow a master, no matter how radical, to speak for them. They later spent immense amounts of time and effort fighting the heritage of craft practices, like the boarding system. It is little wonder that the birth of the Chicago bakers' unions was difficult.

Tool Ownership and Chicago's Furniture Workers

As a significant force in the Chicago German labor movement the bakers were rather late in arriving, compared, for example, to the woodworkers. Chicago cabinetmakers and joiners, largely German, struck for higher wages in 1852.⁵² German cabinetmakers had an association incorporated by the state in 1855, most likely so that it could function better as a benefit society selling insurance and handling funds.⁵³ Several woodworkers' unions with strong German representation were organized during the Civil War, and the woodworkers were the predominant group in the German section of the eight-hour demonstration of 1867.⁵⁴ In the early 1870s Chicago's German cabinetmakers led the movement for a national furniture workers' union, becoming Local Number 1 of that body in recognition of their efforts. The furniture workers were also one of the strongest forces behind the founding of the Chicago *Vorbote* in 1874, the city's first long-lasting German labor paper. Later they were one of the main elements in the eight-hour movement that revived in the mid-1870s, and they promoted the issue strenuously through the 1880s and beyond.

Chicago's German woodworkers, and particularly the furniture workers, obviously had an easier time organizing than the bakers, but why? The furniture workers had an especially strong sense of craft tradition, while they worked in an industry that was a prototype of gilded-age mechanization.⁵⁵ Beginning in the 1860s Chicago's furniture entrepreneurs introduced the new machines—planers, circular saws, jig saws, joiners—which were becoming available to them. With the machines came the subdivision of labor and the employment of unskilled labor, particularly children. And yet the mechanization of the furniture plants was a process under way in the gilded age and not an accomplished fact. In 1875 one of the larger Chicago firms employed 150 men, half of them skilled furniture makers and the other half machine hands and day laborers.⁵⁶ Almost as high a proportion of skilled workers was employed in 1880 at a Chicago chairmaking factory with a work force of 160.⁵⁷

The transformation of Chicago's furniture factories deeply affected a group of workers with a special sense of the traditions of their craft and the value of their skills. This sense of craft pride was supported by the furniture workers' ownership of their own tools. In a very concrete sense the furniture workers owned some of the means of production, and if one includes their skill within that concept they owned even more. The tools that a skilled woodworker had to have were numerous and costly. A guide for German immigrants to the United States published in 1850 listed over forty kinds of tools that a carpenter was expected to have in his tool chest in America. At that time these tools would have cost 20

⁵² Bessie Pierce Papers, Chicago Historical Society, citing the *Chicago Daily Democrat*, 15.5.52.

⁵³ Pierce, Vol. II, p. 166.

⁵⁴ *ISZ*, 3.5.1867.

⁵⁵ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Education and Labor, *Report on Relations between Labor and Capital*, 47th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C., 1885), I, 568.

⁵⁶ *Vorbote*, 22.5.75.

⁵⁷ *ChAZ*, 24.3.80 and the manuscript of the federal manufacturing census for 1880.

percent of a year's salary.⁵⁸ After a fire destroyed a New York furniture plant in 1888 the *Möbel-Arbeiter-Journal* calculated that the workers had lost a capital investment in the factory worth \$7,000.⁵⁹ The tradition of tool ownership among furniture workers was even enforced by the employers. In the early 1880s the work force of Koenig & Gainer's large furniture plant in Chicago was divided into foremen, engineers, cabinetmakers, turners, carvers, varnishers, finishers, machine-hands, packers, and laborers. Among these, the cabinetmakers were the only ones required to supply their own tools. This craft tradition within the factory remained despite the fact that Koenig & Gainer had introduced "labor-saving machinery."⁶⁰ Their company was, therefore, a good example of the hybrid character of gilded-age manufacturing plants in which machines were used but the whole process of production had not been mechanized and in which traditional craftsmen were still essential.

Tool ownership—which helped define these men as traditional craftsmen—also shaped the public rituals of the craft. A standard part of gilded-age furniture strikes was the return of the skilled workers to the plant to take back their possessions, often accompanied by a noisy crowd of supporters.⁶¹ But why did the strikers have to return to the plants in the first place? A Chicago chairmakers' strike in 1880 offers a clue: thirty-six men returned to the factory to get their tools, *including* their work benches.⁶² In contrast to English and French workers—and to the custom in Germany—it was standard practice for German furniture workers in America to own both their "large" and their "small" tools.⁶³ The large ones included work benches, C clamps, bar clamps, and miter boxes.⁶⁴ The quantity and size of the tools required that the strikers return to the plant with friends and wagons to get their tools instead of simply walking out with them at the beginning of the strike. The employers in turn used the tools remaining in their factories to blackmail or at least embarrass the strikers.⁶⁵ In 1885 the Brunswick and Balke Billiard Table Company in Chicago made the strikers take their tools from the hands of the scabs.⁶⁶

The value of the tools and their necessity for the livelihood of the workers made their loss a personal and family tragedy. The frequent fires in furniture plants, probably due to the boilers needed to drive the steam engines, were thus a plague and nightmare to gilded-age furniture workers. A fire at Stotz and Voltz's plant in Chicago in 1877 was the occasion for considerable discussion in both the labor and popular press. The major German dailies were taken back by the fact that skilled and industrious furniture workers of long standing in the firm were unable to buy new tools and were forced to go on to public charity.⁶⁷ The furniture workers' union used the occasion to advertise its tool insurance fund as one

⁵⁸ C.L. Fleischmann, *Erwerbszweige, Fabrikwesen und Handel der Vereinigten Staaten von Nordamerika. Mit besonderer Rücksicht auf Deutsche Auswanderer* (Stuttgart, 1850), pp. 223–225. The proportion of a year's salary was calculated on the basis of a wage of \$1.63 per day, the middle of the range of wages as given in this book.

⁵⁹ *Möbel-Arbeiter-Journal* (hereafter *MAJ*), 10.3.1888.

⁶⁰ U.S. 10th Census, 1880, Vol. XX: *Report on the Statistics of Wages in Manufacturing Industries* (Washington, D.C., 1886), p. 440.

⁶¹ An especially good example was the strike at the Bruschke factory in Chicago; *Vorbote*, 31.3., 7.4., and 14.4.1886.

⁶² *ChAZ*, 20.3.80.

⁶³ *MAJ*, 7.12.89.

⁶⁴ *MAJ*, 7.12.89; 26.9.84.

⁶⁵ *ChAZ*, 26.3.80; *MAJ*, 7.12.89.

⁶⁶ *ChAZ*, 2.6.1885.

⁶⁷ *Vorbote*, 7.4.1877.

of the concrete benefits of union membership.⁶⁸ It noted that New York's German furniture workers had had a tool insurance fund since the mid 1860s, and the fund had recently been made available to the whole national furniture workers' union.⁶⁹ Tool insurance remained one of the main concerns and attractions of the Chicago furniture workers' union.⁷⁰

By the end of the 1880s, however, discussion began to appear in the *Möbel-Arbeiter-Journal* about the whole practice of tool ownership, particularly of the large tools. The New York local considered itself of sufficient strength to broach the delicate subject in the paper and lead a movement for the elimination of the custom.⁷¹ According to the New Yorkers the issue had arisen among the membership because employers increasingly used the tools to blackmail the workers and because employment had become more unstable. Frequent changing of jobs required expensive transporting of the tools, which also increased the likelihood of their loss. What had once been the pride of the furniture workers now limited their freedom of movement and supplied their employers with a weapon against them. The paper concluded: "Es ist Zeit, dass hier bald eine Aenderung eintritt. Der Schreiner, dessen Aussichten auf Selbstständigwerden gleich Null sind, sollte sich von diesem Klotz an seinem Dasein in Gestalt eines Wagen voll Werkzeug befreien und das Beschaffen desselben dem Unternehmer überlassen, ..." ⁷² It is important to note that this suggestion concerned the big tools, not the small ones; the furniture workers were not ready to give them all up. Nonetheless there is no better point at which to mark both the decline of craft traditions among German furniture workers and the growing consciousness that they were modern wage earners.

Both the ownership of tools and the skill they possessed in using them gave German furniture workers in the gilded age a special sense of independence and pride in themselves and in their craft. This whole mentality made it easier for them to act together and oppose their employers in a way that distinguished them from other workers and made them among the forerunners of the Chicago labor movement. Their union organizers did not have to constantly fight the submissiveness and lethargy that were the constant enemy of the baker unionists. This mentality of independence and self-respect among the furniture workers survived for so long because craftsmen were indispensable to furniture production in the gilded age, even in the biggest plants. As the state of mechanization and rationalization of production increased toward the end of the century this was no longer the case, and craft practices and culture declined, especially in the larger shops. Before these changes took place, however, the craft traditions of the German furniture makers had helped make them among the most organized and progressive groups of workers in America.

Conclusion

The German artisan culture in gilded-age Chicago was significantly shaped by the speed and depth of economic change in the period. The simple translation of craft ideals and organizational forms into modern labor institutions was never possible, as the history of

⁶⁸ *Vorbote*, 31.3.1877; 7.4.1877.

⁶⁹ *Vorbote*, 7.4.1877.

⁷⁰ A descendant of Local No. 1 still exists in Chicago today—Local 1784 of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America—and it maintained the sick benefit and tool insurance funds started by Local 1 at least through the 1960s; "96th Anniversary of Local Union No. 1784," p.4.

⁷¹ *MAJ*, 10.3.1888; 7.12.1889.

⁷² *MAJ*, 10.3.1888.

the journeymen's unions as early as the Jacksonian era shows.⁷³ On the other hand, by the late nineteenth century the development of the economy had put unusual strain on artisan culture, making large parts of it anachronistic. Being anachronistic meant in particular that practices which had previously been pillars of strength for the craft became instead weapons against the artisans in their new role as industrial workers. The clearest example of the strain on artisan culture is the bakers' ill-fated effort to make a traditional benefit society into a modern union. The union locals that developed out of the Society occupied themselves not only with the annual contracts but also with fighting the heritage of the craft, like the practice of boarding with the bosses that had become a means for exploiting the journeymen. In the case of the bakers the anachronistic character of artisan heritage was probably increased by the importation of practices from Germany that may still have had some relevance there but which were practically out-dated in Chicago.

The furniture workers offer a fascinating contrast since, according to the *Möbel-Arbeiter-Journal*, the practice of owning the big tools was not typical of Germany but rather became common among German furniture workers in several foreign countries. Far from an anachronism for most of the period, tool ownership was actively encouraged by the manufacturers themselves. Yet by the mid 1880s it was clear that ownership of at least the big tools was a mixed blessing. The systematic mechanization of production was eliminating the hybrid character of the older manufacturing system in which traditional productive techniques had been integrated into larger units. This transformation destroyed the niches in the factories where craft practices had prospered and turned the tradition of owning the big tools against the furniture workers themselves.

Similarly, the workers' associations showed the limitations of their origins in an earlier era. They performed a critically important function in the formative years of the 1860s when Chicago's first labor movement emerged. They helped train leaders, promoted education and the development of intellectual skills, fostered ideals of mutuality and common effort, and initiated German workers into American politics on the basis of a popular republicanism shared with the larger political culture. They were, however, limited in their usefulness by their cross-class membership and by the tension in their goals between education and entertainment on one hand and political action on the other. When in the 1870s Chicago's German workers founded strong unions and a substantial labor press the workers' associations declined in significance, as these newer institutions took over their former educational and organizational roles.

The fact of living in Chicago in the gilded age—one of the most advanced and rapidly expanding industrial cities in the country—forced German artisans to make special efforts to adapt and transform their cultural heritage to meet their contemporary needs. The result was a group of workers unusually disposed to radical solutions to social and economic problems. The reputation of the city's German workers for being radical was widespread. Testifying before a Congressional committee in 1883, P.H. McLogan, a representative of the Chicago Trades Assembly, said, "In Chicago, three or four years ago, the socialistic labor party polled 13,000 votes ... The socialistic party in Chicago, almost without exception, I would say, ... is composed of foreigners, and the great mass of them are Germans."⁷⁴

⁷³ The tension between the journeymen's unions and the trade societies organized to represent the whole craft is one of the main themes of the antebellum labor movement. See John R. Commons et al., *History of Labour in the United States*, I (New York, 1981), 185–423.

⁷⁴ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Education and Labor, *Report on Relations between Labor and Capital*, p. 585.

A simple ethnic explanation for this phenomenon is inadequate because there were times before and after the gilded age when German workers in Chicago were not radical. Of course, the Anti-Socialist Law in Germany also sent numerous socialist emigrés to America and to the city, but that does not explain why these men had such a large audience among the mass of German workers during the 1870s and 1880s. On the other hand, since German workers were unusually skilled, they were in a critical position to experience the rapid and fundamental economic changes taking place.⁷⁵ By directly threatening traditional skilled labor, these changes aroused the artisans who had always been the leaders of the modern labor movement, men who in gilded-age Chicago were so frequently German.

Just because the character and pace of change in Chicago put unusual strain on artisan culture does not mean that it was any less indispensable to the men in the gilded-age labor movement. As it had for other workers previously, artisan culture gave German workers in Chicago the standards by which to judge the changes taking place in their lives, the associational forms and models they could use to begin to organize, and the personal skills and sense of integrity they needed for the task. The contributions in this regard of the Workers' Associations, the Bakers' Mutual Benefit Society, and the furniture workers' tradition of tool ownership have already been mentioned. All of them helped promote a cultural environment that fostered personal independence, a sense of common interest, and intellectual growth. This critical significance of artisan culture for the modern labor movement in Chicago corresponds to that in other countries. Studying the origins of German labor institutions in the 1870s, Wolfgang Renzsch found that,

Handwerkliche Werte und Normen gaben nicht nur das Raster für die Beurteilung neuer sozialer Umstände ab, sondern halfen auch bei der Artikulation des Protestes und der Bildung von Organisationen. Die Bildung von Komitees, Streikausschüssen, Kassen, lokalen gewerkschaftlichen Vereinigungen etc. war deutlich von zünftlerischen Organisationsmodellen inspiriert. Ohne die handwerklichen Vorstellungen über die Sozial- und Arbeitsbeziehungen einerseits und die Kenntnis zünftiger Organisationsmodelle andererseits wäre die organisierte Arbeiterbewegung nicht in den zu beschreibenden Formen entstanden.⁷⁶

Similarly, evaluating the significance of artisans in the labor movements in the whole Atlantic world, Bryan Palmer concluded that "it has become a standard axiom of an emerging social history of the working class that the artisan, not the debased proletarian, fathered the labour movement," and he did this using all the resources of artisan culture at his disposal.⁷⁷ The case of the German artisans in gilded-age Chicago corroborates these general findings while emphasizing the critical importance of the period and place in question. Artisan culture performed a mediating role between two eras, allowing Chicago's German artisans in the gilded age to use their heritage to build something new and appropriate to an order in which crafts and craftsmen were outmoded.

⁷⁵ In an extensive sample of the 1880 federal manuscript population census taken by the Chicago Project over 37 percent of the employed German males were skilled.

⁷⁶ Renzsch, p. 20.

⁷⁷ Palmer, p. 14.